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A course for aspiring mercenaries.

SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS

Hueytown, Alabama

ON JUNE 24, the day after Air India's Flight 182 plunged into the Atlantic, Secretary of State George Shultz publicly deplored the recent wave of terrorism. First the TWA hijacking to Beirut, then a bomb blast at the Frankfurt airport, and now the Air India crash, which, along with an explosion the same day at an airport near Tokyo, was thought to be the work of Sikh terrorists.

Denouncing "the despicable acts of terrorists," Shultz proclaimed, "All nations must unite in decisive action to curb this threat." Vice President George Bush took time out from his trip to Rome to call for "a redoubling of international efforts to safeguard innocent people against this kind of terror."

BOTH MEN missed the local angle. Lal Singh, one of the Sikhs suspected by the FBI of having had a hand in the Air India crash (and currently at large) had received paramilitary training right here in the United States, with no apparent objection from federal, state, or local authorities. Last November Lal Singh and three other radical Sikhs came to this woody western suburb of Birmingham to learn combat and survival techniques at The Mercenary School. Now three of them are being sought by the FBI in connection with various alleged crimes, including not only the sabotage of the Air India flight but also assassination plots against Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and a prominent minister in his government, Bhajan Lal, while they were in the U.S. (The fourth Sikh is in jail.)

Jimmy, who works at The Merc School, as it is familiarly known here, showed me around headquarters, a warehouse called The Bunker. In a room decorated with maps of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Lebanon, he helped me identify an international assortment of guns hanging from two racks: a Soviet AK-47, an American M-16, a Chinese grenade launcher just like one that appeared in *Red Dawn*. Some of these weapons—the Chinese rocket grenade, for example—are replicas, fully authentic in every way except their ability to fire. Others, like the M-16 and the AK-47, are real. Especially prized are the school's three working submachine guns. Jimmy unzipped each from its leather pouch: a British Sterling ("That's what I'm getting. These things are wonderful"), an Israeli Uzi ("the Real McCoy," not the semi-automatic version you see in gun shops), and a MAC-10 automatic, the weapon of choice in today's drug wars. "All the students get to fire all three," Jimmy explained.

The Mercenary School offers its two-week course in combat and survival about half a dozen times each year at a cost of \$350 (\$75 more if you don't have your own personal gear). Carried out mostly in the field, the course includes training both in survival techniques (rappelling, foraging, land navigation) and in hard-core combat (sniper fire, hand-to-hand combat, explosives and booby traps). I arrived on the last day of the most recent class, too late to witness the field combat training, but Frank Camper, proprietor of The Merc School since he opened it in 1981, insists it is as rough as any offered by the U.S. military, if not more so. Probably the most dangerous exercise is "live fire," where students make their way up a 15-foot-wide creek while real bullets are shot along the banks.

The class one naturally wonders the most about is Demolition. The Sikhs told Camper that they wanted to learn how to make time bombs—it was a time bomb that went off in the Tokyo airport and probably caused the Air India crash. The man who teaches Demolition goes by the nickname Pablo, acquired on missions to the Nicaragua-Honduras border under the sponsorship of the Alabama-based Civilian Military Assistance group, a mercenary organization currently trying to ingratiate itself to Congress and the CIA. He has also fought with Major Saad Haddad's army in Lebanon. Pablo was firm about not using his real name for this article ("I got too much to do. Hate to have to come lookin' for you"), but he let me sit in on his explosives class. He passed around the various kinds of grenades: pineapple (World War II vintage), baseball (the kind "Americans can throw"), and a few others, none of them operable. Some replica sticks of dynamite were also passed around, along with a mine, also inoperable, boldly lettered, FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. Pablo offered a few suggestions about how to rig booby traps with the grenades, some hints about making fuses, and assorted bits of practical wisdom. (You can use Christmas tree bulbs as detonators.) The closest he came to explaining how to make a bomb was when he showed us some ammonium nitrate (a common fertilizer) and said that it can be ignited when a fuel-oil base is added and a blasting cap is rigged. "Naturally you can attach them to any kind of timing device," he said, but he didn't tell us how to work one.

In truth, I was not left with the feeling that I could head off to my local True Value and construct a bomb in my basement. (Anyway, a full understanding of the basics is readily available to anyone who pays a trip to the public library.) But I did feel a bit uneasy as Pablo showed us how to rig a tripwire for a booby trap, and when he told us how, in Lebanon, he took the fuses off a few grenades, then rolled them over the Syrian border. "Them morons picked them up," he said, and when the Syrians later pulled the pins to throw them they blew themselves up. Clearly Pablo was within his First Amend-

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ment rights to talk about such things, even to foreigners (there were a few). Arguably the communication of such information is less of a threat to world peace than, say, the publication of *The Progressive's* famous build-your-own-atom-bomb article, which caused a legal and political stir a few years ago. But there is a moral difference: where *The Progressive* was engaging in a clever (and perhaps irresponsible) form of pacifist polemic, Pablo was passing along his information with the *intention* that it be used to kill people with whom his country may or may not be at war.

AT LEAST that seemed to be his intention. It's a little hard to tell how much of this talk is meant simply to titillate. Camper is in the position of having to convince his customers that his school is the real thing while at the same time convincing the authorities that he's running a theme park. (Since the Air India crash, both Senator Jeremiah Denton and Governor George Wallace have begun investigations of The Merc School.) On the one hand, Camper recently pointed out to *People* magazine that he has trained men who are now fighting in Lebanon, South Africa, the Philippines, and Central America. On the other, his brochure includes a small-type legal notice that The Merc School "is not a mercenary recruitment facility." Only one of the half-dozen or so students I spoke with let on that he was a real mercenary—he ostentatiously declined to name his occupation—and I suspect that he was putting me on. Among the others were a mechanic, who regretted having missed action in Vietnam and said the course helped him build his confidence; a furniture polisher from Australia whose bent was less military than Hobbesian ("If you're a survivalist you're able to find water in times of drought, food in times of famine, so there's no need for war"); a 15-year-old who seemed to view the whole thing as a rite of manhood (he only took the first week because "my mama wouldn't let me" take the other half); and a jolly fellow who does destruction work on buildings in Birmingham, who said it was just a hobby right now. There was even one Yuppie, who works for a brokerage firm in Atlanta and said he'd come strictly for vacation. Two Yuppies if you count a reporter from *The Wall Street Journal's* Atlanta bureau, who put himself through the first week of the course and won the nickname "Wall Street." Surely it was for the benefit of the Walter Mittys, rather than real mercenaries, when, at a graduation dinner to honor the nine (out of an initial pool of 30) who completed the course, Camper led the group in a chant of the old French Foreign Legion motto: *Vive la morte / Vive la guerre / Vive le sacré mercenaire*.

IT MIGHT all seem like innocent fun if it weren't for the four Sikhs who have given Camper's school so much publicity lately. If, as Camper's brochure proclaims, "We endorse no doctrine or policy except results in the field of combat," isn't Camper's school by definition the ideal training ground for terrorists? Yes and no. Camper is not permitted to discuss any role he

may have had in the arrest of several Sikhs who traveled down to New Orleans to kill Bhajan Lal—the trial is pending—but the affidavit filed by the FBI in the case let slip that a "source of known reliability" from Birmingham, Alabama, had told them that the Sikhs had told his "business associate" (who is named in the affidavit, and does work for Camper) that they were off to kill "an enemy of the people." Another FBI affidavit, from the New York office, reveals that the bureau knew the Sikhs were looking for training in explosives and urban guerrilla tactics as early as January, though whether Camper had a direct role in tipping them off then is less clear. A quick flip through the *Birmingham News's* clip file shows Camper has a history of informing on customers who break the law. One was shipping arms to Nigeria, another tried to enlist Camper in a drug hit in Miami. This, of course, is all to the good. If you're in Camper's line of work, you have a *duty* to be a stool pigeon. And it's clear Camper relishes the role of law enforcer: "How else are you gonna penetrate their organization and stop them?"

But what about the Sikhs? Amazingly enough, they failed to discover Camper's blown FBI cover, and that he was a rather fervent patriot. (Despite his organization's claim that it is nonpolitical, you won't hear Camper brag about former students who've gone off to fight with rebels the United States doesn't support, like those in El Salvador or South Africa.) The Sikhs' willingness to reveal their intentions to Camper shows that not all terrorists are smart. But you don't necessarily have to be smart to evade the FBI. Three of the four Sikhs managed to get away, and are now thought to be somewhere in the Far East. And what about the terrorists—whoops, I mean "mercenaries"—fighting for causes Camper believes in? Several of his former students tried to blow up a bridge in Nicaragua last December under the auspices of the Civilian Military Assistance group. Camper says he advised them against going, but what does he expect?

Rajiv Gandhi recently told *Blitz*, an Indian newsweekly, that he finds it "incredible" that the United States permits Camper to run his school. (Naturally this rankles Camper, who says he saved Gandhi's life.) Gandhi's foreign minister has added that he finds the Americans' "legalistic approach" to Camper "deplorable and disappointing." This approach consists of supervision by the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, to whom Camper must pay taxes on his automatic weapons (\$200 for each machine gun). Because Alabama does not regulate or prohibit the sale of these weapons, Camper may fire them off to his heart's content without the interference of the local police; the cops aren't even allowed to find out from ATF what Camper's firing in the woods, since technically that is an invasion of IRS-guaranteed privacy. If Camper kills someone during a live fire exercise, he might get sued or convicted of manslaughter, but unless he's convicted on a criminal charge he may keep his guns. (Camper says no one's been killed yet, though there have been knife

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wounds and at least one heart attack. The worst injury, he says, occurred when one of the Sikhs blew off half his eye with a piece of shrapnel.) Camper's semi-automatic weapons aren't registered with the feds at all. Like all nonautomatic guns, they need only be recorded privately with the manufacturer, the wholesaler, the retailer, and Camper himself.

THERE'S ALWAYS a danger that people like Camper will violate the Neutrality Act, which prohibits organizing an army against a nation with whom the United States is at peace, but according to an official in the State Department's legal office, the standard of proof is quite difficult. New regulations do require that foreigners who receive paramilitary training in the United States receive a license from the State Department, but that only covers half the problem; Americans may still go off to fight as mercenaries after receiving training at The Merc Camp. Not even a war is likely to stop the freelance violence. When I asked Pablo, who has never belonged to the United States military, if he'd join up if we declared war on Nicaragua, he said he wouldn't. "I'd rather do it private."

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